

2005 STATE OF THE CITY
Mayor, James F. Brown

Good Morning. It is with great pride that I deliver the 2005 State of the City Address here at Rome Memorial Hospital.

Fifteen years ago, this hospital was on the financial brink, draining our taxpayers as its debt continued to mount in the millions. However, since then, privatization, the excellent vision and leadership provided by Darlene Burns and the hospital's Board of Directors have transformed it into not only the city's largest employer.... but a hospital that our residents are proud of and confident in its exceptional level of care.

I know first hand, having gone through this process as a member of the hospital board, what it took to turn this hospital around, and I can attest to Darlene's professionalism and dedication to the community.

This hospital is a great example of what our community can do when it comes together and of what can happen when vision... dedication...and persistence are united for a common goal. Now more than ever, Rome Memorial Hospital plays a vital role in the health of not only our citizens but also in the economic health of our community.

Rome Memorial Hospital has more than 1,035 employees and 175 physicians who work together to provide our community with excellence in a broad range of healthcare services, from 24-hour emergency care to routine diagnostic testing for early detection and treatment of disease.

Over the last 10 years, the hospital has made great strides in expanding its services and investing in new technology to advance the care that it provides to our residents. The hospital added radiation therapy to treat cancer, acute physical rehabilitation to help restore people's independence after a stroke or hip replacement, and a senior behavioral health unit for seniors suffering from depression.

It has renovated and modernized over three-quarters of its facility and is now ready to embark upon its most ambitious project with the expansion of its Emergency Department. This \$10.5 million project, which has garnered nearly \$2.8 million in contributions from the community, will position the hospital to serve our community's emergency needs well into the future.

Rome Memorial Hospital's commitment to our community's health is easily recognized. It also makes a significant contribution to the health of our community's economy as an employer and purchaser of goods and services. According to an economic impact analysis, the hospital pumps over \$101.5 million into our local economy.

Rome Memorial Hospital is also one of the key selling points of our community, and I can tell you first hand, that it is a critical component in our ability to draw new business to our area.

Before I continue, I would like to take a moment to extend my appreciation to Darlene Burns, the Hospital Board of Directors and the entire hospital staff by issuing a proclamation to honor Rome Memorial Hospital and recognize the remarkable effort and achievement of this great organization and ask Darlene to come forward and accept this proclamation on behalf of the City of Rome:

I am pleased that on Thursday of this week, I will be able to make an announcement with State Senator Ray Meier and Assemblywoman RoAnn Destito that will show that we are continuously making strides in economic development efforts, and how by working together, we can make real progress and produce real jobs for the people of our community.

This announcement will be, I hope, the first of many this year that will show our dedication to build a better community, to market our area's assets and to create a climate conducive to job development that is already paying dividends. This announcement also comes on the heels of last week's Zoning Board approval for a new powder coating business in West Rome, which brings with it the potential for dozens of new jobs.

Still, we have a lot of work ahead if we are to diversify our economy, attract new business and retain our existing ones. We must continue to focus on non-traditional economic development, and we must, quite frankly, continue to knock on any and all doors where an opportunity might exist.

In 2005, I will focus on three fundamental areas:

1. Strengthening our economy and commercial corridors;
2. Strengthening our neighborhoods; and
3. Strengthening our quality of life.

Today, as I lay out our plans on these three key areas, let me say that I look forward to continuing to work with our Common Council on projects that will achieve these goals and benefit the entire city

ECONOMIC GROWTH

Over the past year, our tax rolls grew by more than \$11 million. This is our fourth straight year of growth and makes Rome one of a precious few upstate communities that can demonstrate sustained growth in our urban core as well as growth in the outside district and Griffiss Park.

Despite this addition to our tax rolls, the 2005 City budget contained a slight property tax increase this year that was needed to continue to provide essential services to the community. We remain committed to conservative fiscal practices, and we remain committed toward making Rome a community that has stable taxes and a proactive climate for business.

I am encouraged by Governor George Pataki's "Aid and Incentives for Municipalities" proposal, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for being proactive and creative in this effort to help our upstate cities.

As a businessman, I appreciate the Governor's call for the AIM proposal to be tied to fiscal incentives and other cost containment strategies to ensure municipal accountability. I believe that for the City of Rome, these fiscal incentives are attainable but not without hard work and commitment on everyone's part. I encourage our state representatives to work with the governor's office to ensure that these measures become a reality.

We are also encouraged by the potential development of new home construction within the city limits. Last year, nearly a dozen new homes were built in Rome, and this year's figures are likely to extend well beyond that as evidenced by proposals for subdivisions on Lorena Road, the Beaver Creek project on Gore Road and the Patriot Meadows retirement community project on Floyd Ave.

I was thrilled last week to announce with Senator Meier and Assemblywoman Destito a program that makes new home construction in Rome more attractive than ever. I would like to thank our state officials for their support for this new law that permits tax incentives on new home construction in Rome.

This legislation, previously adopted by New York State, will help expand new residential development in our city and will better help us compete in this market. This legislation will be on the Common Council agenda tomorrow and I urge all of you to adopt this local law that will make owning a home in Rome much less.

New houses, however, are meaningless if they do not represent a growing community, and while these developments are crucial so too is the need to create career-level employment for our young people. Quite simply, we need good jobs if we are to keep our children and grandchildren in this area.

Our approach remains simple and straightforward. We will be relentless, and we will refuse to accept anything less than success.

We will continue to partner with the Rome Industrial Development Corporation, Mohawk Valley EDGE and the Griffiss Local Development Corporation. Likewise, we will seek to improve our ability to partner with these and other agencies and look to do so more efficiently and effectively.

Furthermore, I am instructing city officials to not only continue with our current marketing and business recruitment strategies, but to make absolutely sure that we are performing as well as possible and that we are leaving no stones unturned in our efforts.

We must be bold, and we must continually promote our community and its assets in our effort to create new jobs. As part of this effort, I am excited that we will soon be launching our new city web page designed to promote Rome, share information and allow everyone in the community to access their government in ways that our forefathers never could have imagined.

I wholeheartedly endorse the relocation of the county airfield to Griffiss Park. This relocation will not only be a boost to the area's regional transportation network but also help us promote and market the potential reuse of the park in a number of ways, including as a hub for cargo transportation. This relocation would open up potential markets that we must aggressively pursue.

We must also pursue developing alternative energy options, including the development of "green" power sources. I applaud the Governor for including future development of these renewable or alternative energy sources in his budget and State of the State messages, and we must be progressive and seek to take advantage of these potential opportunities.

When it comes to defending our nation with honor, integrity and high technology, Rome is already the Center of It All, and it is vital that we continue to work with all of our state, local and federal officials to ensure that the Air Force's Rome Laboratory Directorate stays right here.

Our need for high technology tools to fight crime and terror have never been greater, and we must promote the creation of spin-off businesses from such assets as Rome Lab, the Griffiss Institute and the Department of Justice, all current Griffiss Park tenants.

We are all aware and proud of the roles that Rome Lab, NEADS and DFAS play in our community. These facilities belong in Rome, and I will do everything in my power to make sure that they stay off of future Base Realignment and Closure Commission hit lists.

SAFE, CLEAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Many of us have chosen Rome as our home due to the quality of our neighborhoods. We want to live in a place where children can play outside without fear, the streets are safe and the houses

and landscaping are fresh and clean. Yet we are all aware of an undesirable presence making its way into our community, and the resulting blight and unrest.

One of the goals of my administration is to combat this presence head on, and we are doing so by hiring part-time police officers to get more patrols out on the streets where they belong.... by enlisting the help of community-minded residents through the Weed and Seed program and Neighborhood Watch network... and by stepping up our Codes Enforcement program.

During the past year, we used the public nuisance law to close down five problem properties. Let this be absolutely clear: We will not tolerate drug houses in the City of Rome.

We will aggressively pursue all options available to our Codes Enforcement staff, and this year we have added an additional codes inspection officer to help attack blight and decay. Last year, we set an aggressive pace with the demolition of blighted and abandoned property, including the former gas station and Foodland grocery store in West Rome. Eyesores such as these can no longer be permitted.

This year, our Codes Department will be utilizing a Property Maintenance Program designed to get owner compliance as we work toward our goals to help stabilize and improve our neighborhoods. This program will put the burden on property owners to maintain their buildings and to keep their properties clean and free of trash and debris. Although this program may not be popular with some property owners, because it holds them accountable, it is clear that this is the next step in our on-going efforts.

The City's Real Property Committee continued its aggressive mission of ensuring the rehabilitation of tax foreclosure properties, by transferring them to responsible owners.

Last year, 111 properties have been rehabilitated through public and private efforts, returning more than \$2.4 million in assessed value back to the city tax rolls. By rehabilitating these properties, we not only add value back to the tax rolls, but we also halt the erosion of our neighborhoods.

The Weed & Seed Program will be an important factor in our effort to make our city center a thriving and safe place. Our application to be an official Weed & Seed program location has been filed with the Department of Justice and we are waiting to receive word, hopefully, this month. While it is rare for communities to be accepted into this program on initial application, we are hopeful that an approval will open the doors to increased funding for law and codes enforcement and economic development in our target area.

Even if, like most communities, we fail to receive formal approval in our first year, the program and the process will continue. We have a great team in place guiding our Weed & Seed Program, and it can and will succeed in turning our urban core around.

I urge our Common Councilors here today to address our mass transportation needs by approving the proposed CENTRO project. Let me be clear, we need mass transportation in Rome, but we cannot afford to keep mounting our losses operating the VIP system. The proposed CENTRO project is the best way to preserve a service that thousands of people depend on, but that we can no longer afford to finance.

While I understand the position that some communities may pay too little, the bottom line is that the CENTRO proposal as it stands now would save the taxpayers at least one million dollars over the course of the next five years. In other words, we simply cannot afford to miss this opportunity.

The Rome Police Department and Rome Fire Department have been an integral part of our efforts to protect our neighborhoods. I commend our public safety personnel for their on-going determination and professionalism.

I am pleased with the performance of Jim Masucci, the city's new full-time Public Safety Commissioner. In only a few short weeks on the job, Jim has already hit the ground running and is fully involved in our public safety efforts. As part of the expansion of this position, he will oversee grant writing for our Police and Fire Departments as well as continue to increase the accountability of our uniformed public servants.

QUALITY OF LIFE

In the coming year, we have a great opportunity to preserve and enhance the quality of life in our city.

The arts are a key component in the livability of any community - especially ours, and we are blessed with a variety of impressive artistic, cultural and historic organizations and a number of remarkably talented artists and performers. It is time for us to truly take full advantage of these resources and to fully develop the arts as both a cultural necessity and as vital link in our economy.

By the end of this month, we will move forward with the newly-created Arts Commission whose mission will be to promote and enhance the arts in Rome, to establish a full-fledged Arts and Cultural District and to assist with the promotion and marketing of our agencies, organizations and individuals to help them grow and thrive.

In addition to the arts, we must also address the city's aging indoor skating facility, Kennedy Arena. The arena, which was opened in 1964, is exceeding its building life while demand for this facility has never been greater.

Last year, more than 30,000 people either skated or attended an event at Kennedy Arena. This year, that figure is expected to swell beyond 35,000.

The facility, and its refrigeration equipment, is showing its age as well as the wear from nearly 40 years of heavy usage, and there is no question that it must be addressed in the coming year.

I propose that we begin construction of the new community recreation center. The center will not only incorporate an indoor skating arena but also meet the recreational and social needs of our community. This facility will not only provide meaningful year-round recreational activities to our residents both young and old, but will also provide an economic lift to this city for decades to come. It too will play a vital role in our ability to recruit and attract new business as well as offer a point of destination.

We will continue to work with the National Park Service and the Ft. Stanwix National Monument to take maximum advantage of the Marinus Willett Visitors Center, which will open July 1st.

Throughout the city, you will also see enhanced beautification efforts in the coming year, as well as stepped up efforts in our downtown commercial corridors: North and South James Streets and East and West Dominick Street. Our initiative, through the nationally recognized Main Street Program, has been aggressive in training merchants and city officials on how to improve these target areas and on how to promote the growth of small business in these areas.

I am pleased that Up & Running and the Rome Main Streets Alliance have taken the initiative toward the development of a microenterprise development center in the old Oliver's building on

West Dominick Street. The Microenterprise will serve as an incubator for small businesses with one to five employees, providing a wide array of services and support to help fledgling businesses learn to grow and develop. The goal of the microenterprise center is to nurture these businesses and eventually help them grow up and move out of the center and into their own space in the city.

Work will also continue in accordance with the city's Parks Master Plan. Visual and design enhancements will be completed at Fort Stanwix Park, Gansevoort Park and Veteran's Park. Also, we will see substantial improvements at Steven's Field and Guyer Field in West Rome as well as the development of a new playground and park in South Rome on Lawrence Street. We cannot ignore the importance that our public spaces have not only on the impression others have of our community but also in the quality of life they offer.

I am also pleased to be involved with the grassroots effort to improve the character of our community, and I encourage anyone with a desire to see positive change in our community and in our people to get involved. The project, headed by Dr. Herb Skogland, aims to promote character and virtue and to help reduce such negative factors as crime and juvenile delinquency, by developing a culture of character.

CONCLUSION

We have, over the past several years, earned a reputation as a community that makes things happen. It is important that we continue to feel good about our city and that we look to the future to continue to make positive changes happen in Rome.

We need to keep our momentum and keep building off our successes whether it is increased economic development or in taking back our streets one block at a time.

It is clear to me, and fortunately, clear to many activists and individuals throughout the community, that this isn't just a job for government, but a job for everyone. I encourage each of you to think about what it is that you can do to make Rome a better community. By working together, as part of a team, we can accomplish our goals, we can strengthen our economy, strengthen our neighborhoods and vastly improve our quality of life, not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.

Thank you.